

**THE CIRCLE DANCE OF THE CROSS IN THE *ACTS OF JOHN*: AN EARLY  
CHRISTIAN RITUAL**

**By**

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## Abstract

This study will discuss the original form, function, and meaning of the circle dance of the cross found in the *Acts of John* and determine whether it represents an early Christian ritual practice. This study will assess the evidence concerning the circle dance ritual within the *Acts of John*. Furthermore, a comparative examination of other relevant sources will shed further light on the circle in the *Acts of John*. This paper will offer a hypothetical reconstruction of the circle dance ritual. Ultimately this study will show that the early Christian ritual recorded in the *Acts of John* was in fact an actual ritual and is representative of early Christian plurality. Furthermore, it will illustrate that the ritual draws heavily on Greek philosophical understandings of circle dances representing order and disorder. The study will conclude that this ritual was ecstatic in character, and that it was individually transformative.

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*“The image of a leaping, frisking Christ, his spirit youthful, his steps nimble and ebullient like a colt’s, might strike modern Christians (who know the proper Jesus to be a somber dance-hating moralist or a meek-eyed pastor draped in the heavy blankets worn only by biblical characters in Sunday School pamphlets) as distinctly ludicrous or even sacrilegious. Early Christians seem to have responded as much to the playfulness as to the piety of the Redeemer, who was free to leap into time and out again with all the passionate vitality of a Dionysian dancer.”- James Miller, Measures of Wisdom, 134*

## **Chapter 1- Introduction**

### **A Dancing Savior**

Many children attending Christian schools or Sunday schools may be familiar with the 1963 song "The Lord of the Dance" by Sydney Carter. It was sung quite frequently in chapel services at a particular Lutheran school in Wichita, Kansas. Personal sources have also attested to its presence to some extent in Catholic schools as well. Opinions concerning this song range widely. Some individuals have fond memories concerning the song and connect it to their first stirrings of adult emotions. Others treat the song as an object of ridicule and liken its sentimentality to that of "Jesus Loves Me" and its imagery to the "Donut Song."<sup>1</sup>

The question may be asked, why such a wide range of opinions concerning this song? Furthermore, why has this song been relegated to children's worship? Could it perhaps have something to do with the image of Christ as a dancer? The ridiculing individuals mentioned above have confessed to feeling that the image of a dancing Christ is childish and just plain silly. Obviously for these individuals the image is not accessible.

The negative opinions concerning dance in Christianity are not limited to the notion of dancing deities. Dance both inside and outside worship has been a particular moral problem for certain Christian groups in the past and present. These sentiments are undeniably most hostile in

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<sup>1</sup>Lyrics for "Lord of the Dance" see Appendix 2. Lyrics for "Jesus Loves Me," Jesus loves me this I know/for the Bible

European and European-descendent Christianity. Despite these sentiments, dance does have a minor place in the worship of these cultures. Modern dancers Ruth St. Dennis, Ted Shawn, and Martha Graham have often expressed that their work was religious in nature, and that they transformed theaters and concert halls into sacred space. It is commonly thought among scholars that modern dance spawned the American 20th century liturgical dance movement. Indeed, several prominent modern dancers are responsible for the formation of the Sacred Dance Guild, a primarily Christian organization. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sacred dance existed in isolated pockets of European and European-descendent Christianity, the Shakers being a prominent example. Also prominent are the liturgical dances of medieval Spain.

Concerning the whole of Christendom it is notable that many non-European descendent churches incorporate dance prominently in their worship respective to individual cultural traditions. These cultures clearly see no inherent moral problems with Christian dancing. In the light of this fact the question arises, why has European Christianity relegated dance to a minor sphere of existence? Scholars often point to a rigid body-spirit dichotomy as the culprit behind Christian anti-dance mentality.<sup>2</sup> In this dichotomy spirit is perceived as virtuous and sacred while the body is a vice, secular and perhaps profane. The argument follows that the bodied nature of dance automatically relegates it to the sphere of vice.

Despite the prominence of dance in certain non-European Christian groups, European-descendent Christians are not the only group that fails to incorporate dance in their worship. With the exception of the Ethiopian Church and possibly the Coptic Church, dance is virtually

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<sup>2</sup> Doug Adams, "Communal Dance Forms and Consequences in Biblical Worship," in *Dance as Religious Studies*, ed. Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 35-48.

not present in the Eastern Orthodox Churches.<sup>3</sup> This has not always been the case in the east, however. Evidence from both Patristic writings and the apocrypha indicates that dance was probably practiced in a more prominent manner in the early church, 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E., particularly in Africa and Anatolia.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, this evidence also indicates that for some groups the figure of Christ dancing was not necessarily viewed as strange, abnormal, trite, or inaccessible. The majority of this evidence is concentrated in eastern Christian sources; however, there is some evidence for dancing in Spain.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly a dancing Christ provides an interesting contrast to the other iconographic traditions concerning Christ. The *Acts of John*, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century apocryphal text, describes such a Jesus. Equally surprising is the possibility that this image may have been prevalent in early Christianity. This possibility brings curious questions to mind. What would Christianity look like as a whole if the introductory quotation from Miller were representative of its leading religious figure? What would be different theologically and historically? What would change in piety and practice? How would a dancing savior be reconciled with a suffering one? What does it mean to have a dancing God?

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, revised edition ed. (London: Penguin, 1993), 275.

<sup>4</sup> This evidence is discussed in greater detail in chapter 4; for a complete list of patristic sources on dance see Backman, 18-37.

<sup>5</sup> Note the strong popularity of AJohn among Spanish Priscillians, see Schaferdiek, coupled with the strong Spanish Medieval dance tradition, see Taylor, 19-20.

## Circle Dance of the Cross

The *Acts of John* (*AJohn*) describes what appears to be a little known Christian circle dance ritual, often referred to as the circle or round dance of the cross by modern scholars. The text narrates an event that takes place directly before the arrest and crucifixion of Christ. Christ and his disciples are gathered together presumably in place of, or immediately following, the synoptic description of the Last Supper.<sup>6</sup> The text describes, via a sermon by John the Apostle, how Christ told the disciples to form a circle and hold hands. (*AJohn* 94) Christ places himself in the middle of the circle and gives instruction for the disciples to answer ‘amen’ in response to his statements. He then begins to sing a hymn which is recorded in the text along with the disciples’ prescribed response.<sup>7</sup>

Following the dance hymn narrative, the text proceeds to Christ’s arrest and crucifixion. In this version of the story, John retreats to the Mount of Olives, where he has a vision of Christ. In this vision Christ reveals many things to John including the meaning of the circle dance. This section of the text is commonly referred to as the revelatory section or revelatory discourse. It provides the primary interpretive framework for accessing the meaning of the circle dance ritual in *AJohn*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The text does not mention the Last Supper and does not contain any direct allusions to the synoptic description of the Last Supper; however, several eucharists are offered throughout the text. The portion of text immediately preceding this dance ritual is lost.

<sup>7</sup> Complete text of the hymn can be found in Appendix 1.

<sup>8</sup> If this ritual was performed by actual Christians, then the revelatory discourse presumably provides interpretative clues as to its meaning for Christians performing it.



## **Purpose and Outline of Study**

The purpose of this study is to discuss the original form, function, and meaning of the circle dance of the cross found in *AJohn* and to determine whether it represents an early Christian ritual practice or instead is a literary construction. Proceeding from a textual analysis, this study will assess the evidence concerning the circle dance ritual within *AJohn*. Furthermore, a comparative examination of other relevant sources—Christian, Greek and Syrian—will shed further light on the circle in *AJohn*. Based on this analysis this paper will offer a hypothetical reconstruction of the circle dance ritual. In conclusion a commentary on the significance of this ritual to Christian history will be offered. Ultimately this study will show that the early Christian ritual recorded in *AJohn* was in fact an actual ritual and is representative of early Christian plurality. It also provides an example of a ritual which did not become dominant in later Christianity. Furthermore, it will illustrate that the ritual draws heavily on Greek philosophical understandings of circle dances representing order and disorder. The study will conclude that this ritual was ecstatic in character, and that it was individually transformative for participants in addition to serving communal functions.

## Chapter 2- History of Scholarship on the Circle Dance and the *Acts of John*

### History and Description of the Text

To understand the circle dance ritual in *AJohn*, we must first understand its literary context. This leads us to the history of scholarship on the text. *AJohn* as a complete text has not survived. Scholars have created a composite text of *AJohn* from various fragments. M. Bonnet in 1898 prepared a version from ten Greek fragments. E. Junod and J.-D. Kaestli later prepared a text which makes use of 25 fragments. All of these fragments date from the 10th to 15th century C.E. Nicephorus in his 9th century work *Stichometry* indicates that the *AJohn* contained 2,500 lines. If this source is correct then it would appear that only 70 percent of the text has survived to be incorporated into the composite text.<sup>9</sup> Due to the fragmentary nature of the manuscripts, the precise ordering of the text is debatable. There is also some debate as to what fragments actually represent the original format of *AJohn*. The chapters including the hymn and other relevant material for this study, (87-105) are only attested by one manuscript, *Vindobonsis hist. gr. 63. (C)*.<sup>10</sup>

The original language of *AJohn* appears to be Greek. In addition to the Greek manuscripts, fragments of the text have been found in Syriac, Armenian, Coptic (Sahidic and Bohairic), Georgian, Arabic, Ethiopic, and Old Slavonic. Although the manuscripts that have been found are relatively late, numerous secondary attestations are found in the Patristic writings from the 4<sup>th</sup> century onward.<sup>11</sup> Eusebius mentions the work in a list of apocryphal texts.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Paul G. Schneider, *The Mystery of the Acts of John* (San Francisco: Mellen Research Press, 1991), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>11</sup> Knut Schaferdiek, "Acts of John," in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 153-162.

<sup>12</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, trans. G.A. Williamson, reprint ed. (London: Penguin, 1985), 3.25, pp. 89.

Epiphanius in *Panarion*, 375 C.E. mentions it as an Encratite text.<sup>13</sup> Attestations are found in the Manichean Psalm-book.<sup>14</sup> These appear to be some of the earliest mentions of the text. It appears later in the Monarchian prologue to the Gospel of John which points to its usage by Spanish Priscillians.<sup>15</sup> Probably due in part to its acceptance among these groups, the text appears in a list of banned books in a letter written from Innocent I to Exsuperius of Toulouse, 405 C.E.<sup>16</sup>

The narrative of *AJohn* consists of the missionary travels and miracles of John the Apostle in Ephesus. The genre of *AJohn* is usually classified as a Hellenistic romance; however, the hymn, which is the primary object of this study, is best classified as a liturgical hymn.<sup>17</sup> The hymn is situated within a sermon given by the Apostle John. This sermon presents a narrative told from John's point of view. The text of *AJohn* is typically classified as gnostic or as having strong gnostic inclination.<sup>18</sup> It also shows a strong knowledge of the synoptic gospels and the Gospel of John.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Acts of John and the Circle Dance of the Cross in Modern Scholarship***

The esoterist, G.R.S. Mead wrote three articles in 1926 on the topic of the circle dance of the cross for his Quest publication for the Theosophical Society. Despite the somewhat pseudo-

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<sup>13</sup> Epiphanius, *Pan.* 47.1.5, ed. K. Holl/J. Drummer II, (Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte Berlin 32), 1980, 216.5f. Citation found in Schaferdiek, 153.

<sup>14</sup> Ps. -Cyprian, *De Montibus Sinai et Sion* 13, ed. W. Hartel (Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum 3.3), 117.2-6. Citation found in Schaferdiek, 153.

<sup>15</sup> It is relevant to note that Spain is one of the few places with a continual dance tradition throughout the middle ages.

<sup>16</sup> For complete list see Schaferdiek, 152-156.

<sup>17</sup> R. H. Miller, "Liturgical Materials in the Acts of John," *Studia Patristica* 13 (1975), 375-381. This classification has been contested by Dewey. He argues that although the ritual was practiced in the early Church, the text is not a liturgical hymn but rather discourse on the ritual's meaning.

<sup>18</sup> Although these scholars often use the term gnostic or gnosticism they appear unaware of the problematic nature of these categories. For discussions concerning this problem see Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) and Michael Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Schaferdiek, 166.

scientific motives implicit in his work, he provides a useful list of relevant circle dance writings and traditions. His writings also demonstrate the sense of alternative Christian spirituality that this ritual invokes.

Pulver discusses the hymn in *AJohn* in his article “Jesu Reigen und Kreuzigung nach den Johannesakten,” 1942. He compares the hymn to the *Corpus Hermeticum*, especially *Poimandres*. He also uses Mithraism, Origen, and the *Pistis Sophia* to interpret the hymn. He identifies the dance as a gnostic Christian initiation ritual, but does not attempt to place this ritual within a specific gnostic school of thought.<sup>20</sup> Similarly in *Studien zum Neutestamentlichen Prosahymnus*, 1965, Schattenmann identifies the dance ritual as a mystery ceremony parallel with the Eleusinian mysteries. He divides the hymn into four sections which correspond to the structure of Eleusinian initiation.<sup>21</sup>

E. Junod and J.-D. Kaestli have produced the most extensive work on *AJohn*, (*Acta Iohannis*, 1983.) These authors introduce the theory that the hymn, plus chapters 97 and 102, was not part of the original composition. They claim that the hymn was added secondarily into the text sometime in the third century. This post dates the supposed 2<sup>nd</sup> century Egyptian original. They identify the additions as being the work of a gnostic Christian author belonging to the Valentinian group in Syria. Junod and Kaestli offer two possibilities for the secondary inclusion of the hymn. One theory is that it was incorporated clumsily into *AJohn* because of its association with the apostle John. Their second theory is that a gnostic community with

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<sup>20</sup>Max Pulver, "Jesu Reigen Und Kreuzigung Nach Den Johannesakten," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 9 (1942): 141-177. Description of Pulver summarized from Schneider, 5.

<sup>21</sup>Johannes Schattenmann, *Studien Zum Neutestamentlichen Prosahymnus* (Munchen: C.H. Beck, 1965). Description of Schatterman summarized from Schneider, 3.

Johannian affiliation inserted this material for unknown reasons. The rest of the text is not gnostic according to Junod and Kaestli.<sup>22</sup>

Arthur Dewey in his 1986 article has suggested that the hymn is not an actual hymn but rather a revelatory discourse edited into hymn form for theological reasons, namely legitimizing this particular dance ritual. In his view, the editor of *AJohn* used materials to explain the dance ritual rather than to record the factual practice of the ritual. Dewey further attempts to place the dance tradition of *AJohn* within the larger body of dance texts. He concludes that the dance is best classified as a *hyporchema*, a Hellenistic tradition involving imitative dance and ecstatic dance.<sup>23</sup>

Many scholars working in the field of ancient dance scholarship, such as Backman,<sup>24</sup> Oesterly,<sup>25</sup> Unik,<sup>26</sup> Gruber,<sup>27</sup> Taylor,<sup>28</sup> and Lonsdale,<sup>29</sup> have provided useful information for the interpretation of the dance in *AJohn*, but none have attempted an exhaustive study on the subject with the exception of James Miller, 1986. Miller provides a complex discussion of the dance in *AJohn* and how it relates to Hellenistic dance tradition. Ultimately he concludes that *AJohn*'s dance is of a more ecstatic disorderly type similar to Dionysian cultic dance. He uses relevant

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<sup>22</sup> Gerard Luttikhuisen, "A Gnostic Reading of the Acts of John," in *The Apocryphal Acts of John*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Kampen, Netherlands: Pharos, 1995), 120; Schaferdiek, 164-167; Schneider, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur J. Dewey, "The Hymn in the *Acts of John*: Dance as Hermeneutic," *Semeia* 38 (1986): 68-80; Jean-Daniel Kaestli, "Response," *Semeia* 38 (1986): 81-88.

<sup>24</sup> Louis E. Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*, trans. E. Classen (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1952).

<sup>25</sup> W. O. E. Oesterly, *The Sacred Dance* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1923; reprint, 1968).

<sup>26</sup> W.C. Van Unik, "A Note on the Dance of Jesus in the 'Acts of John'," *Sparsa Collecta* III (1983): 144-147.

<sup>27</sup> Mayer I. Gruber, "Ten Dance-Derived Expressions in the Hebrew Bible " in *Dance as Religious Studies*, ed. Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 48-66.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Taylor, "A History of Symbolic Movement in Worship," in *Dance as Religious Studies*, ed. Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 15-34.

<sup>29</sup> Steven H. Lonsdale, *Dance and Ritual Play in Greek Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1993).

dance texts and similar hymn texts to interpret the dance ritual in *AJohn*. In general his work is best understood as a comparative study of Classical Greek and Hellenistic dance.<sup>30</sup>

Schneider, in his study *The Mystery of the Acts of John*, 1991, asks how this hymn relates to the rest of *AJohn*. His study asks questions concerning the reasons for this hymn's inclusion within the larger work. He also inquires as to the significance of the hymn for the community reading *AJohn*. He concludes that the hymn is an initiation into gnosis via sacred dance and further hypothesizes that the hymn represents a gnostic sacrament. It is unclear precisely why he concludes that this 'sacrament,' as he refers to it, is gnostic. It seems likely that he shares the common prejudiced tendency to classify all non-orthodox things as gnostic.

In contrast to Junod and Kaestli, who see the rest of *AJohn* as irrelevant to the interpretation of the hymn section, Schneider sees continuity between the hymn section and the rest of the text. He explains that the stories centering on John's missionary activities provide the groundwork for interpreting the hymn and the revelatory discourse. For example, the resurrections found throughout *AJohn* should be understood in connection with the spiritual transformation and rebirth into the likeness of the Lord which is present in the hymn and revelatory section. Schneider concludes that the text's function is to legitimize this particular ritual. Furthermore he theorizes that *AJohn* was composed by someone within a community under persecution from other Christians because this would clearly explain their need to legitimize their rituals.<sup>31</sup> Schneider does not critique the hypothesis that the hymn was inserted from another existing source, but he also does not support it. His criticism of Junod and Kaestli centers solely on their characterization of the hymn as a crude insertion. Schneider finds nothing

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<sup>30</sup> James Miller, *Measures of Wisdom* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1986).

<sup>31</sup> Luttikhuisen, 122; Schneider, 5.

crude about it. For him the hymn has theological and political purposes in line with the larger work.

Schaferdiek completed a translation and commentary on *AJohn* in 1965 which was revised heavily in 1991. Schaferdiek holds the opinion that the hymn section and revelatory section were an integrated component of an original composition; although, they stand apart in both form and content. However, he does agree they were inserted from another source. He claims eastern Syria and 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E. for the original composition. The text's function is polemical and attacks the orthodox tradition found in the Gospel of John. For him, the gospel section of *AJohn* is clearly gnostic. He characterizes the theology as being exclusivist, dualistic, and anti-hylic. Salvation comes through the revelation of Christ. They have a realized eschatology which, according to Schaferdiek, is evident from the repeated raisings of the dead, and he also notes the importance of conversion in the stories of resurrection. This further supports his claim that salvation comes from revelation. Furthermore, Schaferdiek claims that the community of *AJohn* had no need for sacramental mediation and that "the eucharist celebrated without wine as a breaking of bread has the character of thanksgiving and remembrance of Christ for his glorification. The new life manifests itself in . . . aversion from all that is earthly and corruptible, in an encratite contempt for worldly goods, in disparagement of the body and in sexual continence."<sup>32</sup> Based on the revelatory discussion of the cross, which shares much in common with a Valentinian understanding concerning the cross,<sup>33</sup> Schaferdiek agrees with Junod and Kaestli about the Valentinian origins of the text. Although Schaferdiek does specify what is meant by this so-called Valentinian understanding of the cross, he is most

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<sup>32</sup> Schaferdiek, 165.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 164-167.

likely referencing the lack of physical suffering in crucifixion present in several other apocryphal texts.<sup>34</sup>

Luttikhuizen in a 1995 publication critiques Schneider's analysis of the relationship between the hymn and the revelatory material that directly follows it. In his view the dance does not transform the disciples into the image of the Lord or unite them with him. This is apparent in the scattering which takes place after the hymn. John's revelation alone allows the reader to understand the dance. Therefore, the dance is not an initiation rite or sacrament but is rather a symbol of the lack of gnosis imparted to the Christians who trace their traditions through the other apostles. John's Christians of course are granted the gnosis because of John's revelation. For Luttikhuizen the dance is solely a literary construction with no actual ritual.<sup>35</sup>

The meaning of the dance, according to Luttikhuizen, consists primarily of the consubstantiality of man and divine. Christ shares in manhood and men share in divinity, and the dance reveals this. This hypothesis goes far to explain the presence of the antithetical statements. Applying this understanding, in one line Christ speaks as a man, and then in the second line as divine. The responsorial "amen" applies the same consubstantiated condition to the disciples.

Luttikhuizen is not sure of the Valentinian hypothesis or the connections with the cross revelations. He does claim a gnostic theology for the hymn and revelatory discourse by way of the cross cosmology, the lack of physical suffering, the levels of existence to the Christ, and the particles of light. He also claims that this text is a polemic against orthodox traditions but suggests that this does not mean that the community was in any way schismatic in their world view. They may have viewed themselves as the inner circle of Christians. Luttikhuizen stresses

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<sup>34</sup> *Apocalypse of James, Apocalypse of Peter*, and perhaps others.

<sup>35</sup> Luttikhuizen, 121.



the gnostic continuity throughout the text but ultimately concludes that the rest of *AJohn* does not have a specifically gnostic character. It does not, however, have a hostile character toward gnostic systems and the text might be highly relevant to the gnostic reader.<sup>36</sup>

### **Synthesis and Commentary**

*AJohn* can be called Johannian in the sense that it shares much in common with other texts which center on the Apostle John. The assumption that the text is written to or by Johannian Christians is based on the assumption that such a group exists. Even if such a cohesive group does exist, which identifies its origins in the Apostle John, there is no proof that this text is actually representative of them. Assuming that one could identify one cohesive group of Johannian Christians, references to their founder or theology could be included in texts for various reasons other than that the text is representative of this group. Hypothetically, the compiler of *AJohn* could include references to Johannian theology to legitimize a non-Johannian, non-orthodox, or any other type of theology. The point is that the politics surrounding much of these texts are unknown. To speculate this far into the group politics of *AJohn* is to build unstable supposition on unstable supposition.

The text shares much in common with texts typically labeled as gnostic; however, due to the inherent problems with the gnostic categorization this label should be avoided. Rather than the notion of gnosticism, it is far more relevant to classify this text as being representative of early Christian pluralism. It is not so much a matter of identifying uniformity with a gnostic system or school of thought, as it is a demonstration of the lack of uniformity within early Christianity.

In contrast to the body of scholarship on *AJohn* this study will not attempt to situate the text or the ritual with any known or assumed group of Christians. It is significant enough to

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 130-152.

recognize that this text was written with a purpose, although the fullness of that purpose is unknown, and therefore was important to at least one person in the ancient world, namely the author. Furthermore the preservation of the text, although limited, demonstrates that other individuals in the ancient world found this text useful (for whatever purpose). It seems reasonable to assume that these individuals were Christians or at least interested in Christianity otherwise these individuals would probably not find the text useful. Attestations denouncing the work demonstrate that orthodox writers believed the work to be representative of heretical Christians. These writings indicate that orthodox Christians were interested in *AJohn* in the sense that they did not like it and were interested in demonstrating that Christians who gave it credibility were in error. The fact that orthodox writers are so concerned with denouncing it strengthens the argument that non-orthodox Christians were reading the text. So from this evidence we can conclude that *AJohn* was written and read by Christians who ultimately did not fit into the orthodox picture of Christianity, as defined by the orthodox. What is significant is not what group these Christians belonged to but rather that they existed. Similarly, the significance of the circle dance is not that there is an identifiable group of Christians performing this ritual but rather the possibility that this ritual existed and was practiced by some Christians somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean.

It is relevant to this study that the hymn section and revelatory discourse was probably incorporated from another source; and thus, it is present in a broader literary context. Its presence in more than one literary source could suggest a broader literary tradition. One could still argue that this is evidence of a literary tradition alone; however, the presence of a literary tradition with an institutional-like description of Christ and the Apostles' physical performance of this ritual strengthens the argument that it is describing an actual practice.

It is also significant to note that the scholarship of *AJohn*, save Luttikhuizen, supports the assertion that the text represents an actual ritual of some sort, initiatory, sacramental, or otherwise. Luttikhuizen's argument against this claim seems unfounded. The text does seem to indicate that the other disciples do not understand this ritual and only John has the revelatory key for understanding, as Schneider has realized; however, this is part of the polemical nature of the text. The preference for John does not preclude the element of actual ritual. For this compiler the ritual was instituted by Christ and only John has understood it. Likewise, his communities within the text, to which he communicated this knowledge, are the only Christians who are privy to his knowledge. The polemical nature of the narrative surrounding the ritual strengthens the argument that the text describes a liturgical practice which the compiler of *AJohn* felt needed to be legitimized.

### Chapter 3- Circle Dance Ritual in the *Acts of John*: a textual Analysis

#### Hymn Text

The hymn begins with a doxology addressed to Father, Logos, Grace, Spirit, Holy One, and Light. Within the opening lines of this doxology, the narrator interjects saying that the disciples “circled round him (Christ).” (*AJohn* 94) This interjection illustrates the movement of the dance, either clockwise or counter-clockwise around in a circle. After this doxology Christ continues saying he will explain why they, Christ and the disciples, give thanks. The hymn proceeds with eight antithetical phrases centering on the word play between actives and passives, for example “I will be saved and I will save.” (*AJohn* 94) In each of these phrases Christ is referring to himself. Because of Christ’s introductory statement, the reader is asked to conclude that each of these statements about Christ are reasons for thanksgiving. The disciples’ antiphonal response ‘amen’ is recorded after each statement.

After these eight phrases, John further interjects with the cryptic declarative “Grace (*charis*) dances.” The exact meaning of whom or what *Grace* is has baffled scholars. Comparisons to other so-called gnostic texts that have referred to *Grace* as an emanation of Sophia, has led some scholars to assume that “Grace Dancing” is Sophia descending to participate in this ritual.<sup>37</sup> It seems likely that Christ is *Grace* as Christ later refers to himself as *Grace*.<sup>38</sup> The question as to whether *Grace* is also Sophia remains open. In identifying Christ and *Grace*, the text appears to indicate that Christ is also dancing, presumably within the circle.

Following the interjection, the hymn continues with a new antithetical structure. The new structure consists of active declaratives, such as “I will pipe,” followed by imperatives like,

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<sup>37</sup> G.R.S Mead, "The Sacred Dance of Jesus," *The Quest II* (1926): 66; Miller, 111-112.

<sup>38</sup> It is also possible that the text is intending to equate Christ and Sophia.

“dance, all of you.” Following this structural change, the hymn temporarily discontinues its antithetical structure and gives four descriptive lines concerning the nature of this ritual. The lines quoted below from this section of the text provide the reader with further insight into the meaning of this ritual. They are the following:

“I will pipe,

Dance, all of you.’ – ‘Amen.’

‘I will mourn,

Beat you all your breasts’ – ‘Amen.’

‘(The) one Ogdoad sings praises with us.’ – ‘Amen’

‘The twelfth number dances on high.’ - Amen

‘To the All it belongs to dance in the height (?)’ – ‘Amen.’

‘He who does not dance does not know what happens.’ - ‘Amen.’” (*AJohn* 94)

As is now apparent, the disciples’ ‘amen’ response continues to be relayed by the author. The first two statements are reminiscent of Christ’s otherwise obscure statement in the synoptic gospels concerning his generation being like children calling to one another saying “We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn. (Matt.11:17; Luke 7:32) The synoptic passage has a very negative tone toward these degenerates. In *AJohn* Christ is not speaking to the degenerates but to the disciples. Congruently the compiler of *AJohn* is not speaking to non-Christian outsiders but to Christian insiders. If the two texts are understood together they essentially say the outsiders who reject Christ do not dance with the piper; however, the insiders, Christians, are commanded to dance with the piper. Presumably the author is telling his readers to dance with the piper as well. In following this thought to its natural conclusion, the author is not only describing this ritual to his readers but also commending it to his readers as the command of Christ. This is not entirely dissimilar from the

synoptic eucharistic command, “Do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19) In both instances the authors are legitimizing their respective rituals by describing them as having been instituted, prescribed, and commanded by Christ himself.

Furthermore, the reader is introduced to the cosmic significance of this ritual in the above statements. The Ogdoad, being a mythic grouping of eight supernatural deities, are singing along with the ritual; while the twelve on high are dancing as well. The twelve in this instance have usually been interpreted as the zodiac; however, there may also be further cosmic meaning behind the number twelve. The “All on High” (*AJohn* 94) are also in some way connected to this dance. Despite the lack of precise knowledge of which cosmic constructs are being invoked, the message is clear. There is a cosmic component to this ritual as the Ogdoad and the zodiac are invoked. They are conceived of within the text as participating in the movements of the ritual. They are not bystanders in this dance. Their actions are not perceived as past or future events but present events. There is a closeness and immediacy to this cosmic element, a sense of ‘here and now.’

The final statement in the above quotation indicates that this dance is dealing with some kind of knowledge.<sup>39</sup> One who does not dance does not ‘know.’ Presumably one must dance to ‘know,’ or one must ‘know’ to dance. This is another statement about insiders and outsiders. Those who dance with Jesus are the insiders of the knowledge. Those who do not dance are the outsiders. Assuming that this ritual was actually practiced by groups of Christians, then it follows that the dancers, those who belong to these groups, have the insiders’ knowledge. Thus the passage is saying those who are inside the group, symbolized via this dance ritual, are the

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<sup>39</sup> The kind of knowledge is best understood as mystical knowledge of the cross of light - its meaning and significance - which will be discussed in later sections.

legitimate possessors of knowledge, and those outside the group, symbolized by their lack of participation in the dance ritual, are not possessors of knowledge.

Returning to the description of the hymn, Christ returns to antithetical statements. In this instance they are concentrated around actives and passives for four lines. Then he turns for three lines to direct paradoxical statements like “I have no house, and I have houses.” (*AJohn* 94) In each phrase of this structure Christ says he does not have some kind of place in the singular and yet he has those places in the plural. The precise meaning behind this discourse on the ownership of locations is not clear. Perhaps it relates to the anti-hylic theme expressed within the text. Continuing on, antithetical statements are dropped entirely. For four more statements Christ uses metaphors to describe himself followed by declaratives about the disciples’ insider relationship with said metaphors, such as, “I am a lamp to you who see me.” (*AJohn* 94)

After these four statements the written ‘amen’ response discontinues, and Christ begins a lengthy speech addressed to “You who dance” (*AJohn* 94) in which he proceeds to offer theological revelation about his role and purpose. This speech is cryptic and very little can be gleaned from it. Clearly the speech is supposed to be revelatory to the readers of *AJohn*. This speech continues for nineteen statements. Then Christ closes the ritual with another doxology. Christ makes a few concluding remarks containing various themes from the hymn. The disciples say ‘amen.’

In summary, this ritual in *AJohn* is described as a circle dance in which the disciples hold hands and circle around Christ. Christ sings a cryptic, antithetical, at times paradoxical hymn and the disciples say ‘amen.’ There is a cosmic component to this dance involving the immediate participation of cosmic figures. When the form of the hymn shifts to a speech

concerning Christology, the ritual explanation also ceases. It seems reasonable to assume that this speech is included by the author more for its interpretive value than as a description of how this ritual was performed by Christ and his disciples. Assuming that this ritual was actually performed by early Christians, this narrative probably describes how the ritual was performed by these communities. Congruently, the lengthy speech toward the end does not pertain to any ritual prescription but rather to theological discourse on the meaning of the ritual. Although not all of the thematic concepts are certain, the material does contain the theme that those who dance with Christ are privy to insider knowledge of him and his purposes. Thematically the ritual clearly contains a strong insider-outsider dichotomy.

### **Revelatory Discourse**

The following chapters of *AJohn* are also relevant to this discussion as they provide further interpretive clues as to the meaning of this ritual.<sup>40</sup> According to the text, after the dance Christ went out and was arrested. All of his followers fled, including the text's speaker John who fled to a cave atop the Mount of Olives. At the same hour when Christ was crucified and the land was covered in darkness, John received a vision. The vision is of the cross of light. John describes that a great crowd encircled the cross, and Christ was above the cross. Christ speaks and explains that for the sake of humankind this cross is called by many names including, Christ, Logos, and Grace. Christ indicates that the importance of this cross is that it makes all things stable and firmly fixed. This seems to reflect to a theme of order from chaos through the Logos. As in many ancient texts order is characterized as separation. Here we have the typical Christian separation of good and evil within the description. Christ then goes on to explain that the multitude encircling the cross are not of one form and are of an inferior nature; however,

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<sup>40</sup> Section summarized consists of *AJohn* 97-101.



those in the cross are one form and likeness. “When human nature is taken up” (*AJohn* 100) and the race that hears and obeys comes to Christ, they will be united with it, the cross, and transcend as Christ has. Christ explains that he has not suffered and died as others will say. He concludes by saying, “even that suffering which I showed to you and to the rest in my dance, I will that it be called a mystery.” (*AJohn* 101)

Christ’s concluding statement indicates that, according to the author of *AJohn*, the dance in some way reveals this mystery of Christ’s suffering. The precise way in which the dance accomplishes this is not clear. In the speech section of the hymn Christ refers to his suffering as the passion of man, and he indicates that this suffering is necessary for the disciples to understand what they suffer. If this text contained more orthodox themes, then this statement of suffering would make sense as a foreshadowing to martyrdom; however, this appears to mean something else within this context. The text states that “you (disciples) saw me (Christ) as suffering, and seeing it you did not stay but were wholly moved.” (*AJohn* 94) Unless the author, scribe, or translator of the text has greatly eschewed the grammar of this passage, it appears as if the suffering to which Christ is referring has already taken place seeing as the disciples have already seen Christ as suffering. It seems likely that this suffering, being the “passion of man,” (*AJohn* 94) should be understood without reference to the crucifixion but rather to a more pervasive element of human suffering.

The nature of human suffering within *AJohn* is not at all clear. Perhaps it is the suffering of a spirit being trapped within a mattered body as is typical in some gnostic texts. Perhaps the text merely refers to the human condition in the sense of being born into a life which ultimately leads to death. Regardless of the precise theological meaning, it is clear that this suffering, which Christ has already experienced and will experience, has been seen by the disciples and is

currently being experienced by the disciples. Furthermore it appears as though Christ is indicating that he was sent to reveal, by example, to the disciples that they are suffering. Later he adds, “if you knew how to suffer you would be able not to suffer. Learn how to suffer and you shall not be able to suffer.” (*AJohn* 94) Clearly there is a mystery to this suffering as is evidenced by the paradoxical comments concerning it. To better understand these phrases it may be useful to interpret this as knowing about suffering. In this case knowledge about this human suffering which Christ reveals will enable the disciples to escape the suffering or perhaps view suffering as positive and liberating. It is significant, however, that the text does not use the term ‘about’ but employs the active construct of learning how to suffer. It may be possible to learn how to suffer without actually suffering; however, since it has already been indicated that the disciples are suffering, that is hardly the appropriate interpretation for this ‘learning,’ but rather this seems to be a notion of learning by doing. As the text states, the disciples are already suffering. Perhaps Christ is telling them to learn from this experience to escape it. This is perhaps what is meant earlier in the hymn when Christ indicates that those who dance have knowledge. This is perhaps the experiential knowledge of the human condition of suffering which is escapable only by recognition of the condition. This is a mystery, as Christ calls it, and it is accessed through the dance.

The dance references the mystery of suffering not only as the disciples experience it and are commissioned to escape it. It also refers to Christ’s mysterious suffering and yet non-suffering of the crucifixion. Christ informs John that he did not suffer and die on a wooden cross but rather he joined the cross of light and ascended. Christ also makes clear that it is the destiny of John and other Christians to follow in his path by joining the cross of light and ascending. This is surely the path to escape suffering as Christ did. This is also offered to the disciples as

they can escape suffering via the knowledge accessed through the dance. With this logical linkage the dance ritual becomes quite clear. The disciples perform a dance around Christ which is parallel to the circle around the cross in John's vision. Christ united with the cross of light is clearly the central focus of the ritual. Christians of this world, who have not joined with the cross and ascended, prepare for this ascendance via this ritual.<sup>41</sup> In circling they are asked to experientially contemplate the future union with the cross and subsequent ascendance. This contemplation is necessary as experiential knowledge is required to escape the suffering and join with the cross of light. Christ of course is the example as well as the goal. The overall experiential purpose of this ritual is to attempt a foreshadowed union with cross of light.

### **Comparative Analysis between the Circle Dance Ritual and the Eucharist**

In relation to orthodox Christianity, the ritual appears to have strong parallels with eucharistic ritual. The theology behind both defines these rituals as central to demarcating insiders and outsiders. In many ways eucharist and the circle dance could be seen as opposite and competing theologies of communion. Both are intended to unite participants in a mystical way to the cross of Christ, the difference revolves around the nature of this cross. In eucharist it is the cross of sacrifice and suffering. In the circle dance it is the cross which escapes suffering. Union with either has similar results for the participant. They are no longer subject to the normal fate of human beings. They are destined for greater transformation and union with Christ after their death. The mechanism of transformation, however, is entirely different. In eucharist it is sacrifice for sin and the ritual eating of bread which allows for this transformation. In the circle dance it is knowledge revealed by the example of Christ through ritual dance which allows for transformation.

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<sup>41</sup> The nature of ascendance, whether final ascendance at death or on-going ecstatic ascendance, is not clear.

The close similarities in function as well as the direct theological opposition between these rituals indicate the likelihood that this ritual is an alternative to the orthodox eucharist.<sup>42</sup> If this is accurate, then the text represents an attempt to record the details of this ritual and legitimize its standing within the Christian community. The relative success of this attempt can probably be inferred by the fact that there are no extant copies of this text.<sup>43</sup> Despite this text's lack of popularity, and the presumed dislike for the circle dance ritual contained within, circle dances continue to be a ritual practice in Christianity through the medieval period.

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<sup>42</sup> Similar theories have been put forward by Junod and Kaestli; however they use the term replace or supplant eucharistic ritual which implies the primacy of eucharist over this circle ritual. Since the text tells nothing of its origins there is no reason to assume secondary chronology. Alternative implies only that it was seen as a different path.

<sup>43</sup> It is also noteworthy that the text is mentioned in orthodox polemic against non-canonical texts.

## Chapter 4- Interpreting Circle Dance Ritual within a Cultural and Historical Context

### The Circle Dance and Christianity

The circle dance in *AJohn* may not have been well received by orthodox Christians; however, the circle dance tradition provides key cultural and historical context for understanding this ritual. In the same way an analysis of circle dance traditions in other relevant cultural and historical contexts may provide yet more interpretive clues. We have already discovered the ritual form and certain elements of meaning, but the character of the experience has not been addressed. Evidence from the interpretive contexts mentioned above help to substantiate our interpretation of the text. This evidence also allows us to make hypotheses concerning the experience of this ritual.

When analyzing the evidence for circle dances it is important to understand that there is not an official ‘dogma’ on dance in orthodox Christianity. Dance was not significant enough to be treated on the whole by Patristic writers; however, the Patristic evidence is often reconstructed into the orthodox ‘rule’ on dance.<sup>44</sup> This construction is problematic given that the evidence is limited in quantity.<sup>45</sup> In this study we shall endeavor to treat these writings as the opinions of certain orthodox individuals rather than the orthodox opinion, which is itself a later construct.

Generally speaking dance is viewed favorably during the pre-Constantine period. It is understood as a mirror which reflects the cosmos as the celestial bodies also dance around God in praise. As we have seen, this cosmic understanding of dance is reflected in *AJohn*. Further similarities between *AJohn* and orthodox writings are found in Clement of Alexandria who

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<sup>44</sup> Backman, 18-39; Mead: 50-64.

<sup>45</sup> For and extensive list of Patristic attestation on dance see Backman, 18-39.

references the same insider-outsider dichotomy by employing the same positive construction of Matt. 11:27.<sup>46</sup> For Clement, the Christian circle dances symbolize the body of Christ (the church), which may indicate a functional similarity between the circle dance and the eucharist. Eusebius praises dance as well. He exonerates the dances of the *Therapeutae* as they are recorded in Philo.<sup>47</sup> Philo's description of choruses that have "drunk of the pure wine of divine love just as in the bacchic rites,"<sup>48</sup> seems acceptable to Eusebius. Despite this somewhat colorful and 'Pagan' depiction of the *Therapeutae*, Eusebius describes their behavior as fully Christian.<sup>49</sup>

In the years following Constantine, the Patristic writing on dance contains censure. There is no direct condemnation of dance, but rather an invective against dances which are perceived to be 'Pagan' in origin. This includes wedding dances, dances at the graves of martyrs, and the ecstatic dances which some groups performed during the eucharist.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps these ecstatic participants in the eucharist should be seen in parallel to the alternative eucharistic ritual in *AJohn*. If indeed there is a connection it might be inferred that dance in *AJohn* is ecstatic as well. Further evidence supporting this possibility will be discussed later.

In addition to condemning many forms of Christian dance as ultimately 'Pagan,' the general trend among the Patristic writers at this period is to de-emphasize any physical rituals or performances of dancing and emphasize the symbolic meaning behind them. They are sublimating the reality of Christian dancing and promote it solely as a theological construct.

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<sup>46</sup> *Stromata* VII. xiv. 87

<sup>47</sup> *History of the Church*, II. xvii. 1

<sup>48</sup> *On the Contemplative Life* 83-5

<sup>49</sup> This is not historically accurate as Philo was writing of a community that existed before the time of Christ.

<sup>50</sup> Basil the Great, *Epistle* xl; John Chrysostom, *Hom. I* (in *illud vidi dominum*), *On the Resurrection of Lazarus* i, *Proaem in Pss.*; Ambrose *On Repentance* ii.6:42, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* vi, *Speech* xlii; Gregory Nazianzus *Oration Against Julian* 11,171 ; Augustine *Speeches* cccxi, For dancing at eucharist see John Chrysostom, *Hom. I* (in *illud vidi dominum*). List compiled from several secondary works including Taylor, 16-19, and Backman, 18-39.

Furthermore, the original cosmic element is abandoned during this period and is replaced with a mythological cosmic depiction of heaven with angelic choirs circling heavenly figures such as Christ. This new theology which emerges contrasts *AJohn*'s ritual depiction of cosmic figures dancing with the followers of Christ. Now dancing is only performed in the heavens and these performers never dance in earthy dances. These are transcendent dances not dances to facilitate transcendence as in *AJohn*.

Some scholars have seen this Patristic censure of dance as a reform and response movement which proves that Christian dance was widespread. They typically understand the Patristic writings as reactions against Christians performing 'Pagan' practices. It also seems probable, however, that the ever growing political force of the Christian community felt pressure to fall in line with mainstream Roman ideology. Some Romans, for example Scipio Aemilianus and Quintilian, are known to be suspicious of dance because of its perceived connection with homosexuality.<sup>51</sup> Sachs has asserted that Romans typically did not value ecstatic dance, which some Christians were performing. According to Sachs they preferred mimetic dance<sup>52</sup> most likely because it was better entertainment.<sup>53</sup> Sachs seems to attribute this preference to some sort of national character flaw; however, it could just as easily be attributed to its presence in Greek mystery religions which were often labeled pejoratively as superstitious.<sup>54</sup> If this distrust of dance, particularly ecstatic dance, is representative of the political climate in the Constantine period then Christians may have felt inclined to adapt to it. In other words Christians may have

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<sup>51</sup> Anthony Corbeill, *Nature Embodied* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 120-122.

<sup>52</sup> Mimetic dance is defined here as a dance that directly imitates a character by depicting his/her actions and reactions by gesture or dance. This should be understood as distinctive from the broader category of imitative dances which includes but is not limited to mimetic dances.

<sup>53</sup> Curt Sachs, *World History of the Dance* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1937), 244-245.

<sup>54</sup> Mary Beard and John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 211ff.

had political impetus, the need for official Roman legitimization, for censuring ecstatic dances that resembled Greek ecstatic mystery religions.

It is also significant to note that despite the parallel between the Roman ideology of dance and later Patristic writings, early Christians were not, as Romans were, overly fond of imitative dance, mimetic or otherwise. Christians believed that through mimesis one becomes vulnerable to possession by spirits or deities being portrayed.<sup>55</sup> For Christians it seems that the issue was not about mimesis but rather who or what was being depicted mimetically. If this line of thinking were to be applied to the circle dance in *AJohn*, it is possible that participants might imitate Christ in the dance in the hopes of being mystically possessed or united with Christ. Possession of course would not be used due to the polemical nature of the term, but one could imagine the term “mystical union” being employed to indicate the positive condition resulting from mimesis. This parallels the kind of union which appears to be the goal of the dance ritual in *AJohn*.

### **The Circle Dance in Greek Context**

In some sense the Patristic writers’ concerns about the ‘Pagan’ origins of certain Christian dances are at least historically valid as there does seem to be Pre-Christian religious influence on Christian dances, particularly the dance ritual relayed in *AJohn*. The cosmic component of the dance ritual in *AJohn*, also echoed by the Patristic writings, is a common Greek philosophical understanding of dance. According to Plato’s *Laws* choral dancing represents the movements of celestial bodies.<sup>56</sup> It represents the principle of order within the

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<sup>55</sup> Ruth Webb, "The Protean Performer: Mimesis and Identity in Late Antique Discussion of the Theater," in *Performing Ecstasies*, ed. Luisa Del Giudice and Nancy van Deusen (Ottawa, Canada: Institute of Mediaeval Music, 2005), 8.

<sup>56</sup> Lonsdale, 45ff; Miller, 20ff.



cosmos. It reflects the very cosmogony of the Greek mythology in that the universe was created by making order from disorder.<sup>57</sup> By dancing, society reflects the universal ordering and reaffirms this principle as an ethic which permeates all of human existence. In other words dancing the principle of order is not only dancing the ordering of the stars but also the ordering of society. The dance is an acculturating tool, teaching people young and old about the universe, society, and the individual's place within these systems. This same dance ideology can be gleaned from *AJohn*. It shows similar understanding of the circle dance as a reflection of cosmic movements and human beings' participation within these cosmic movements. Furthermore, John's vision shows that the circle dance reflects an ordering principle as well. The cross of light makes things stable and of one form. Beings are sorted and separated by their relationship to this cross. Those not in the circle represent something entirely different that should be kept separate. Christ says, "ignore the many and despise those who are outside the mystery." (*AJohn* 100) This is similar to the Greek circle dances which separate citizens from non-citizens. According to Lonsdale the non-citizen dances were constructed to represent the opposite behavior of the citizen dances to demonstrate the improperness of the outsider and to solidify the proper behavioral pattern of the insider.<sup>58</sup> Clearly both Greek and Christian dance traditions understand their dance as being tied to a principle of order that is pervasive through the cosmos and also demarcates the insiders and outsiders in their respective group.

Along with the principle of order in Greek dances there is a complementary principle of disorder. Although initially it would seem that these two principles are paradoxical, they appear

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<sup>57</sup> This is not unique to Greece as order from disorder is a common theme in the Ancient Near East.

<sup>58</sup> Lonsdale, 27.

to overlap within the world view of the ancient Greeks.<sup>59</sup> The principle of disorder represents the chaos that existed in the universe before the ordering principle was acted upon which created ordered cosmos. Apparently this ordering principle has a dormant presence within chaos; thus, the pervasive mechanism by which disorder tends toward order is a pre-existent potential in all things. By dancing disorder, one is merely inverting the normal principle of order to embody the chaos which inevitably moves toward order; thus reaffirming order again. In sum, dancing the principle of order and disorder ultimately lead to the affirmation of the universal order by slightly different mechanisms.<sup>60</sup>

Miller suggests that *AJohn* is a classic embodiment of Greek ideology on dances of disorder.<sup>61</sup> According to Miller, the call to the circle dance of Christ is a break from the order of this world, be it historical, social, or religious. In a sense it is a complete deconstruction of the present order. In inverting this order, the ritual is free to reconstruct a new order. This is revealed to the participant through the ritual itself. For Miller, this explains the cryptic paradoxical statements. The mechanism for this ritual follows the Greek model of inversion of order, liminality, and then reconstruction of order which ultimately affirms the ordering principle. Although the ordering principle is affirmed in both traditions, however, the structures built around that order are different. Greek dance, according to Lonsdale's analysis of Plato, ultimately affirms the original workings of society around the ordering principle. In *AJohn* it would appear that the re-establishment of order affirms a completely different world view than the one that was originally deconstructed.

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<sup>59</sup> For primary information on order and disorder in Greek cosmology see Hesiod, *Theogony*. For an explanation on the role of dance in cosmology see Plato, *Laws*. For secondary treatment the topic see Lonsdale, 76-110.

<sup>60</sup> Lonsdale analysis is an application of Victor Turner's Social Drama and Inversion Theory.

<sup>61</sup> Miller, 84-139.

The Greek dances based on principles of disorder which Miller sees within *AJohn* are commonly associated with Greek mystery cults. Several scholars have hypothesized a connection between the dance ritual in *AJohn* and choral traditions in other prominent mystery cults. Dewey identifies the circle dance ritual as a *hyporchema*, a Greek classification for dance recorded by Lucian. According to Dewey this form consciously combines song and dance to induce ecstasy as in the mystery cults.<sup>62</sup> Although Junod and Kaestli disagree on certain points of Dewey's analysis they agree that the dance is akin to a mystery cult ritual.<sup>63</sup> Schneider further suggests that it is an initiatory mystery rite.<sup>64</sup>

Curt Sachs generally describes the structure of these mystery religions' choral dances as:

“The dance leader in the center is the god Dionysus, who with the vegetation of the earth lives, suffers, sickens, and dies and at any given moment awakens anew, like Osiris in Egypt and Attis-Adonis in Asia Minor, and in the circle surrounding him the fifty choral dancers share his fate, interpreting, suffering, and rejoicing with him.”<sup>65</sup>

In this description of the mystery cults there are many similarities to *AJohn* beyond just the physical similarity of a circle dance. The deity is placed in the center. Life and death hang in the balance for both the deity and the participants in both rituals. There is an implicit connection or union between the deity and the participants which has realistic effects on the destiny of the participants. One minor difference seems to be the apparent connection between this world and its fertility in reference to life and death in the Dionysian mystery cult ritual. *AJohn* is very other worldly focused. There is also a similarity in the stark contrast between insiders and outsiders in both *AJohn* and the mystery religions. If this connection to mystery religions can be further established it is more probable that the ecstatic quality is also shared. This evidence along with

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<sup>62</sup> Dewey: 67,74-75.

<sup>63</sup> Kaestli: 84.

<sup>64</sup> Schneider, 2, 178.

<sup>65</sup> Sachs, 243.

Patristic evidence seems to substantiate the claims for *AJohn* as an ecstatic dance. Furthermore, if this mystery cult is the prototype for *AJohn*, it may also be a reasonable assumption that when the ritual was performed there was a leader who represented Christ who danced in the middle of the circle. This parallels the description of Christ in the center of the circle as described in the text.

### **Circle Dances in Ancient Syria**

Having analyzed the hymn in reference to its Christian context and in reference to Greek culture which had diffused through the west and ancient Near East by the period of the text's composition, it is now prudent to address any local customs that may also influence this dance ritual. Syria is the hypothesized location of the composition of this section of *AJohn*. This presumed origin of course opens the hymn to influence from Semitic cultures.<sup>66</sup> The presence of circle dances in Semitic cultures is widespread and well documented; however, unlike in Greece, research in this area has failed to produce treatises on the philosophical meaning of circle dance rituals. Generally speaking it appears that Semitic circle dances, particularly in Syria, often focused on sacrifice and not the movements of the heavens.<sup>67</sup> The theological concept of Christ's sacrifice is downplayed in *AJohn*; thus, it seems unlikely that the ritual is intentionally drawing upon this Syrian tradition. There is another Syrian dance tradition, according to Oesterly, that may be influencing the ritual in *AJohn*.<sup>68</sup> There is Syrian evidence for ecstatic dance, rare among Semitic cultures, in which an individual falls into a state of ecstatic prophecy accompanied by dance. It appears that the purpose of this ecstatic dance was for participants to merge with a god.

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<sup>66</sup> It should be noted that this is Hellenistic Syria; however, the process of Hellenism alters not deconstructs therefore Syrian evidence is relevant.

<sup>67</sup> Oesterly, 95-96.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 115-119.

Although there is no evidence that this was a circle dance, this evidence strengthens the hypothesis that *AJohn* relays an ecstatic dance tradition in which the participant merges with the religious figure. Furthermore, the notion of ritual imparting knowledge is not significantly different from the notion of ritual leading to prophecy. In both cases the participants are seeking truths from the divine through ecstatic means. It is also significant to the overall discussion that a Syrian inscription clearly shows that the Syrians believed in or entertained the image of a dancing God or God of dance.<sup>69</sup>

### Summation

In summary, the evidence gathered from the historical and cultural contexts surrounding *AJohn* shows strong parallels with other immediate cultural traditions. From an analysis of the cultural and historical influences on *AJohn*, namely the Christian movement, pan-Greco-Roman culture, and local Syrian traditions, many themes emerge. Both Christian and Greek sources support the interpretation that *AJohn* has a cosmic component, particularly in the parallel between the dance movements and the movements of celestial bodies. An analogy to Greek traditions suggests that *AJohn* represents a dance of disorder which ultimately affirms the principle of order.

This analogy also indicates that *AJohn* can be understood as a text describing Christian mystery cult patterned on the Greek model. The physical details of the performance of the dance described in *AJohn* matches descriptions of mystery cult circle dances of Dionysus. Thematic elements such as life, death and suffering, union with the deity, and strong insider-outsider

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<sup>69</sup>Greek Inscription of Baal Marquod from Deir el-Kala (near Beirut), translated as "Lord of dancing". Found in Oesterley, 56, quoted from Renan, *Mission de Phenice*, pp. 355f (1864) and Clermont-Ganneau, *Rec. d'Arch*, Or. 95,103 (1896).

dichotomy, derived from the text also show a strong similarity with Dionysian mystery cult. There is also the likelihood that the dance in *AJohn* is ecstatic.

The similarities between mystery cults and the dance ritual in *AJohn* are supported by other cultural sources. The ecstatic nature is supported by Christian accounts of dancing as well as Syrian traditions. The element of revealed knowledge is also present in Syrian accounts via prophecy. Mystical union is also present in Syrian, Greek and Christian accounts. A sharp delineation between insiders and outsiders is also evidenced in Christian and Greek sources. These facts combine to suggest that scholars are accurate in their depiction of *AJohn* as describing a mystery cult ritual built on the Greek philosophical model of dances of cosmic disorder and order. Furthermore, the correlation between the circle dance in *AJohn* and the known ritual dances of Greek mystery cults strengthens the argument that the circle dance was an actual ritual.

## Chapter 5- *Gospel of the Savior*: A sympathetic source for the Circle Dance of the Cross

A recently discovered text given the title *Gospel of the Savior* (*GSavior*) may describe a similar circle dance ritual. If this text describes the same ritual present in *AJohn* then interpretive clues may be gleaned from this source as well.

### History of Scholarship on the *Gospel of the Savior*

*GSavior*, on Papyrus Berolinesis 22220, is a recently discovered gospel. Papyrus Berolinesis 22220 was acquired by the Berlin Egyptian Museum in 1967 from a Dutch antiquities dealer.<sup>70</sup> Nothing more is known concerning the history of its discovery. The gospel was translated and analyzed in the 1990s by Charles W. Hedrick and Paul A. Mirecki. Manuscript 22220 is written in Coptic, specifically the Upper Egyptian dialect Sahidic. Manuscript 22220 dates between the 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries based on paleographic data.<sup>71</sup> The language of the original composition is assumed to be Greek based on certain passages understood as poorly translated Greek idioms.<sup>72</sup> Second century is the suggested date for the original composition of this gospel,<sup>73</sup> indicating that the text was contemporary with *AJohn*. The location of composition is unknown.<sup>74</sup>

Because of the highly fragmentary nature of manuscript 22220, it is difficult to describe the content of the text with any degree of certainty. Many references to the passing of time indicate the probability that the text is a narrative. Mirecki is satisfied with this conclusion.<sup>75</sup> Hedrick stipulated that the possibility that it is a sayings gospel has not been eliminated. He

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<sup>70</sup> Charles Hedrick and Paul Mirecki, *Gospel of the Savior* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 1999), 2.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 23.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Distinctions between Mirecki and Hedrick's view points provided in personal conversations with Mirecki 2008 and 2009.

further indicates the possibility that the text consists of “gospel-like material” encapsulated within a work of another genre, like an epistle or sermon. The narrative appears to take place before the crucifixion. It contains a dialogue between the Savior and the apostles, visionary ascents of the Savior and the apostles into the heavens, and a soliloquy from the Savior addressing the cross.<sup>76</sup> The author is familiar with the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of John, or their sources (according to Hedrick), which is revealed by several parallelisms.<sup>77</sup>

*GSavior*, like *AJohn*, demonstrates the condition of Christian pluralism in 2nd century C.E. Both gnostic and orthodox thinking are present within the text; however, it appears that the orthodox tradition is preferred. No particular school of gnostic thought can be extrapolated from this text, but there are general gnostic themes such as the Pleroma, resisting the rulership of matter, and viewing the apostles as the Savior’s seed.<sup>78</sup>

Since the publication of this gospel by Hedrick and Mirecki, Professor Stephen Emmel in Munich, Germany, has reviewed it and has offered criticism concerning the proposed sequencing of the fragments. Emmel reorganizes the fragments in *GSavior* to the following sequence: 97/98, 99/100, 113/114, 115\*/116\*, 121\*/122\*, 107/108, 105/106.<sup>79</sup> This new sequencing naturally changes the order of events within the reconstructed story. In this proposed new sequencing the narration begins after the last supper before the betrayal and crucifixion. In contrast to the synoptic gospels the disciples and the Savior travel to the Mount of Olives. They have an ecstatic vision and ascend to heaven. Following this scene they discuss the upcoming resurrection and engage in an apparent responsorial hymn.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Hedrick and Mirecki, 2.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 18-20.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>79</sup> Stephen Emmel, ““Gospel of the Savior” Righting the Order of Pages and Events,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 95, no. 1 (2002): 47.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.: 50.



Hedrick has responded to Emmel's assessment and objects to Emmel's new suggested sequencing. In short, Hedrick objects to the reversing of fragment 1 to form a four sheet quire. Relying on his observations of the center fold depressions and the classification of sheets by their flesh and hair side, Hedrick stands by his initial assessment. Hedrick admits that Emmel's sequencing seems simpler and neater; however, he finds this assertion irrelevant citing that history is rarely simple or neat.<sup>81</sup>

Emmel's sequencing is particularly of interest to scholars researching antiphonal hymns, as his version connects the two hymn sections which remain separate in the original publication. In a private communication with Mirecki he indicated that he agrees with Emmel's reconstruction. He noted that the new sequencing appears to offer a more consistent narrative from which to interpret the content of the hymn and theorize about its significance within the text of *GSavior*. Due to the greater structural and logical coherence provided by Emmel's translation, particularly in reference to the hymn, this study will rely primarily on Emmel's reconstruction and translation.<sup>82</sup>

### **Analysis of Textual Similarity**

Hedrick and Mirecki have identified the hymn in *GSavior* as having antiphonal structure parallel to the hymn in *AJohn*.<sup>83</sup> Emmel agrees with this identification.<sup>84</sup> Concerning the structure, *GSavior* does not always indicate speakers; however, the beginning of this hymn indicates that a character(s) within the narration is saying "amen" in response to the Savior's monologue. This eliminates the possibility that the "amens" are simply scribal explanatives.

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<sup>81</sup> Charles Hedrick, "Caveats to A "Righted Order" Of the *Gospel of the Savior* " *The Harvard Theological Review* 96, no. 2 (2003): 237-238.

<sup>82</sup> It is not within the scope of this study to critique Hedrick's codicological argument and the author does not pretend to have enough information to formulate an opinion.

<sup>83</sup> Hedrick and Mirecki, 37.

<sup>84</sup> Emmel: 50

Two antiphonal “amen” responses at the beginning of the hymn specifically have Coptic pronoun markers attached to them. The first pronoun is translated as “he,” meaning, “he replied, Amen” (*GSavior* 74). The Savior appears to be the antecedent of the pronoun; however, it does not make sense for the Savior to reply to himself. Furthermore Emmel suggests that the first “Amen” which clearly reads “he replied” may be understood not as Jesus but as John, who was the last disciple to speak.<sup>85</sup> The second response is not clear in the manuscript. This obscure pronoun in the manuscript could originally have been ‘they’ or even ‘we’, as Emmel describes the narration of the entire text as first person plural.<sup>86</sup> If this is the case, then the second response should be understood as “they/we (meaning the disciples) replied, Amen.” (*GSavior* 76) This hypothesis suggests a strong structural similarity between *GSavior* and *AJohn*. Despite the strong structural similarity there is no indication that these hymn texts reflect the same textual source; however, there is a possibility that the texts are reflecting the same ritual. Thus, they are two independent texts, sharing the same genre and describing a similar ritual dance. General similarities between the theologies of both texts, the incorporation of like revelatory discourse for the interpretation of the hymn, and the structural and theological similarities of the hymn itself, make this conclusion probable.

### **Orientational Similarities**

There are general similarities between *GSavior* and *AJohn* that indicate that the two works are dependent on a common tradition. The prominence of John in both texts is one such similarity. *AJohn* is of course centered on the Apostle John and is quite polemical concerning the preference for John. It appears to be a legitimating text. There is evidence to suggest a similar preference for John in *GSavior*. This preference is evidenced by John being almost the

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<sup>85</sup> Emmel: 58.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.: 49.

only apostle mentioned by name.<sup>87</sup> When the Savior has indicated that he will depart and return again John requests that the Savior not reveal himself in his true form lest the disciples be frightened. The Savior essentially tells John to rid himself of this fear that he might see and believe. *AJohn* contains a revelation of Christ in all his glory, specifically so that John may see and believe and also understand. The two texts contain elements of opposition, one indicating a revelation to John and the other indicating John's wish to avoid such a revelation; however, both center on a theme of revelation. In addition they both center on the theme of a transfigured Christ. John is singled out in both texts concerning both of these themes. Furthermore, Emmel's interpretation of "he replied" as the first 'amen' response in *GSavior* places John in the foremost seat of the disciples responding first, representing and leading them in the hymn. It is significant that John is preferred here in the section of text which parallels *AJohn*. It could also be an indication that the ritual is associated with the name John.

Clearly similar themes addressing the preference for John are present in both texts. There are also many Johannian themes expressed by both texts. Both show an understanding of John's passion narrative which is evidenced by the inclusion of Christ's being pierced in the side on the cross. (John 19:34-35) *GSavior* and *AJohn* contain Christological themes found in the Gospel of John such as the Logos, bread, door, way, truth, life and resurrection. Additionally *GSavior* has many passages which parallel the Gospel of John. (*GSavior* 15-23) Both texts focus on John's concept that the Christ is one with the Father. (*AJohn* 100; *GSavior* 16; John 14:10)

Both *AJohn* and *GSavior* are described as having gnostic themes.<sup>88</sup> Most importantly both texts are anti-hylic and suggest that spirit must triumph over matter. (*GSavior* 11; *AJohn*

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<sup>87</sup> The fragmentary nature of *GSavior* does add a degree of uncertainty to this claim.

<sup>88</sup> The Gospel of John was popular among gnostics as well; therefore, there may not be a strictly categorical difference between Johannian themes and gnostic themes. For evidence see *The First Christian Commentary on John*, by Heracleon.

103) *AJohn* is significantly anti-hylic going so far as to suggest that Jesus' suffering was a symbolic ruse and that no physical suffering occurred. Elsewhere John explains that Jesus left no footprints and that John could put his hand through the actual body of Jesus. (*AJohn* 93) *GSavior* does not go so far in its theology concerning matter to disassociate the Savior from the physical world. *GSavior* blends both themes of physical suffering and also the gnostic element of the crucifixion into one. The Savior cautions that matter should not rule (*GSavior* 11); yet, he does apparently condescend to the physical realm and has very real concerns about the physical suffering. The physical does not, however, limit the Savior as he and the disciples ascend into the heavenly realm and engage in an exhaustive visionary experience without any regard for physical matter. Furthermore the Savior's dialogue with the cross seems to be removed from previous concerns for the physical and suggests a joyous acceptance which happily contradicts and supersedes the previous concern for physical suffering. (*GSavior* 101-119) In both *AJohn* and *GSavior* the cross is certainly not the obstacle of pain and torment that it is within the synoptic gospels and in the Pauline epistles.

It is also significant for a comparison of the two texts to note that both have last supper discourses which do not include an institution of eucharist. This is perhaps in keeping with the tradition of the Gospel of John which has no eucharistic institution and promotes foot washing in its place. *GSavior* hints at eucharistic theology yet does not present it as a liturgical ritual as is the case in the synoptic gospels. (*GSavior* 96) This is similar to what takes place in the Gospel of John where Jesus commands that all must eat of his flesh to enter the kingdom of heaven. (John 6:53-54) *GSavior* also demonstrates eucharistic knowledge with the dialogue about eating with the Savior in the kingdom and clothing in garments bought from the blood of grapes. (*GSavior* 2-4)

*AJohn* has similar passages which demonstrate eucharistic knowledge. In similar fashion to *GSavior*, one such passage is found in the body of the hymn as Christ says, “I want to eat and I want to be eaten.” (*AJohn* 94) Furthermore, *AJohn* has similar eucharistic inklings in the passage before the hymn where it states that Jesus would bless bread and divide it and there would always be enough for everyone. (*AJohn* 93) Although this is part of *AJohn*’s last supper narrative, including the circle dance, it directly precedes it. This placement naturally is reminiscent of eucharistic institution in the synoptic gospels as part of the last supper.

Additionally *AJohn* presents eucharist as a ritual, but it differs in meaning from the synoptic version. The eucharist celebrations in *AJohn* commemorate a physical resurrection, which should be understood as a symbol for conversion as a spiritual resurrection.<sup>89</sup> They deny suffering and affirm unity.<sup>90</sup> These thematic elements connect the eucharist celebrations of *AJohn* more to the theology of *GSavior*, which promotes unity and denies suffering, than to the synoptic understanding of eucharist. This supports the hypothesis that *AJohn*’s dance is a substitution for the eucharistic ritual.<sup>91</sup>

Given the two texts’ use of eucharistic hints while circumventing the actual ritual, and their use of a hymn in the place of any actual eucharistic meal, it seems highly probable that the texts are accounting for the same eucharistic alternative. Further evidence, discussed later, will indicate that similar themes are present in both the hymn and revelatory sections which reveals that both authors had relatively similar theological understanding of the significance and meaning of the ritual and thus appear to share a similar narrative.

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<sup>89</sup> Hans Roldanus, "Die Eucharistie in Den Johannesakten," in *The Apocryphal Acts of John*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Kampen, Netherlands: Pharos, 1995), 91; Schaferdiek, 165.

<sup>90</sup> Schaferdiek, 165.

<sup>91</sup> Kaestli: 87.

Both hymns contain a structure of antithetical statements. The antithetical statements in *AJohn* have been categorized in a previous chapter. *GSavior* shares the antithetical type which contrasts the role of the Christ and the actions of the disciples such as “I am a door, to you who knock on me.” (*AJohn* 94) One example of the parallel type in *GSavior* is “I am fighting for you. You wage war.” (*GSavior* 85) Here the similar structure to *AJohn*’s ‘door’ clause can be seen. Another similarity in structure exists with this example which reflects a larger trend within the two hymns. This consists of revelatory “I am” statements. Usually the “I am” statements are present in antithetical structure as can be seen in the previous example.

Dewey has claimed that these components in the hymn of *AJohn* may have nothing to do with actual hymns.<sup>92</sup> Since some of these components are similarly found in *GSavior* it is prudent to review Dewey’s argument and its application to this study. He theorizes that these antithetical statements are not originally part of a hymn text, but rather revelatory material which has been lifted from another source and combined into this account of the dance ritual. He does not however feel that this in any way disproves the hypothesis that the text of *AJohn* is attempting to legitimize a dance ritual. The incorporation of this revelatory material as a hymn is not without deliberate meaning according to Dewey. He suggests that the choice of text has theological significance for the dance ritual. A revelatory text was incorporated to further demonstrate to the readers the revelatory nature of this ritual both in its institution and in its continuance. If Dewey’s hypothesis proves relevant for *AJohn* is it only natural that it should also apply to *GSavior* as both traditions clearly emphasize that the ritual is a mode of revelation which establishes unity with Christ. The similarity in theme may also go far to explain the textual differences between these two texts which are describing the same ritual tradition. In both cases the author was probably not trying to accurately represent hymns that were sung

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<sup>92</sup> Dewey: 67-68.

during this ritual, but rather they have chosen two different texts sharing similar structural components which represent the meaning of this ritual. Alternatively it is plausible that both texts incorporate hymns that accompanied the ritual performance. Thus, Christians in various locations composed their own hymns for the traditional dance.

### **Revelatory Discourse and Similarities in Interpretation**

Both texts situate the ritual within a framework of revelatory discourse, and both situate that revelation within a mountain top visionary experience. In *GSavior* the disciples ascend the Mount of Olives, after the last supper. It appears that the hymn takes place on this mountain after the visionary experience.<sup>93</sup> In *AJohn*, John proceeds to the Mount of Olives after the last supper, which includes the hymn. It is here that John receives the revelation that allows him to understand the dance ritual. Although the texts present the visionary experience and the hymn in opposite order from each other, both revelatory sections serve the same interpretive function.

To understand the hymn sections of both of these texts it is necessary to study in depth the revelations connected with these hymns as these visions provide the interpretive framework for the hymn. Both sections reveal the theme of closeness with Christ and its necessity. This is evidenced in *GSavior* in “I am the blazing fire. Whoever is close to me is close to the fire. Whoever is far from me is far from the life.” (*GSavior* 71) This statement clearly demonstrates that closeness to the Savior is necessary for life as it indicates that those who do not enjoy closeness with the Savior are far from life. In *AJohn*’s revelatory section, Christ uses the image of the cross with people surrounding it to reveal the theme of unity as discussed in a previous chapter. This unity is certainly comparable with the notion of closeness particularly because of its usage of images of physical proximity. Furthermore in both texts this theme is tied explicitly

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<sup>93</sup> It is possible that the hymn is actually still a part of the visionary experience.

to a circle of followers which has attained this closeness or will attain it. This illustrates the similar theme of exclusivity as mentioned in previous chapters.

There are further significant parallels between the revelatory discourses in the texts surrounding the notion of the cross. It has already been demonstrated that the cross is used symbolically to demonstrate theological issues and to reveal that the ritual served the same function. The cross in *AJohn* is given esoteric significance. It is not a wooden cross but a cross of light. (*AJohn* 99) It is also called Logos, mind, Christ, door, way, bread, seed, resurrection, Son, Father, Spirit, life, truth, faith, and grace. (*AJohn*98) *GSavior* similarly describes an esoteric cross of sorts. The cross is clearly more than wood in *GSavior* as the Savior talks to it as a person. He ascribes feelings to it. (*GSavior* 101-109)<sup>94</sup> The cross is also connected with the Savior in *GSavior* in a similar fashion as in *AJohn* when the Savior adds to his salvific statement concerning closeness saying “O cross, truly, whoever is far from you is far from me. (*GSavior* 119)

This statement on closeness refers the reader back to the salvific revelatory statement about closeness to Christ. Understanding that closeness to the cross is necessary for closeness to the Savior brings the reader to the conclusion that closeness to both the Savior and the cross is necessary. This comes quite close to *AJohn*'s theology of salvation via unity with Christ and the cross of light. With this addition we see that both Christ and the cross in *AJohn* and *GSavior* act as a barrier separating the included from the excluded.

The cross further takes on the function of ordering in these texts. The separation of insiders from outsiders is represented by an individual's location in reference to the cross. *AJohn* makes significant the difference between those on the left and right of the cross and also those around the cross versus those in the cross. (*AJohn* 98,100) *GSavior* creates a similar physical

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<sup>94</sup> A similarly personified walking and talking cross appears in the *Gospel of Peter*.



scheme centered on the cross using right and left, (*GSavior* 101) although this schema does not appear to be the same schema used in *AJohn* both are centering their ordering on this esoteric cross. The crosses in both are seen as a cosmic fulfillment and as an ordering principle. The cosmic ordering principle of the cross in *AJohn* has already been discussed. Similarly in *GSavior* Christ and the cross coming together brings about the condition where “what is lacking will become complete, and what is stunted will become full. . . .What has fallen will rise. . . .the entire fullness will become complete.” (*GSavior* 111-114)

The development of a cosmic ordering cross has important implications for understanding the element of dance in this ritual. It is significant that this cosmic cross is treated similarly in both *AJohn* and *GSavior*. It completes cosmic spiritual objectives and orders elements within the cosmos specifically relating to soteriology. Closeness to this cross is also synonymous with closeness to Christ. (*GSavior* 119) The most significant difference between these two theologies of these esoteric cosmic crosses is found in its relationship with Christ. Although both texts indicate that closeness to the cross is closeness to Christ they accomplish this in different ways. *GSavior* simply states this by way of the negative. It is stated similarly in *AJohn*; however, this text emphasizes further that Christ and the cross are the same. In analyzing these two texts it seems as if they could be understood as the same theology but at different stages. In *AJohn* Christ is revealing himself as the cross after the crucifixion has occurred. The Savior in *GSavior* is foreshadowing the crucifixion in his dialogue with the cross. Perhaps this is why the cross and the Savior, although closely related, are still considered separate entities.

There is a heightened sense of anticipation concerning the ultimate union between the cross and the Savior in *GSavior*. This anticipation is exemplified by certain phrases such as “for this is your desire” (*GSavior* 103) “I am rich. I will fill you with my wealth. I will mount you”

(*GSavior* 105-106) and “recognize your Lord as he is coming toward you, that he is gentle and lowly.” (*GSavior* 108-109) This language surrounding the cross suggests a union or joining parallel to Christ’s joining with the cross of light. It is not clear in the text if the Savior intends the Apostles to be united with the cross as is the case in *AJohn*; however, this joining with the cross brings the cross into the center of the circle as it is depicted in *AJohn*.

### **Conclusions on the Gospel of the Savior**

Having examined the relevant evidence which links the two hymn texts both structurally and theologically and also the similarities between the theologies of the larger texts, it seems probable that both hymns represent the same ritual practice. The cosmic significance of the cross has already been demonstrated. As shown earlier dance research in Classical and Hellenistic Greek culture reveals that dance is typically understood as having cosmic significance. *AJohn* indicates that the cosmic entities of the Ogdoad and the Twelve, perhaps the zodiac, also participate in this same dance. (*AJohn* 94) In *GSavior*, the Savior has the same cosmic importance as in *AJohn*. Although there is no reference to the Ogdoad or other deities within the hymn in *GSavior*, the revelatory material contains a vision of heavenly worship which apparently involves singing. (*GSavior* 41) This is significant as the image of dance in heavenly worship is common in Patristic writings. Furthermore this depiction of heavenly worship indicates that *GSavior* also depicts cosmic elements participating in the ritual.

It is clear that Jesus gathers his disciples to him. (*GSavior* 72) Further he says he is in their midst or among them a little while. (*GSavior* 75) It is natural to interpret this phrase as being a prophetic statement about his death and ascension; however, it could also mean to impart to the reader Christ’s physical location within this scene being in the middle of his disciples. If this is the case then it is probable that the disciples are in a circle around him. The circle dance

around an object of worship is often tied to unity in ancient dance traditions. *GSavior* contains strong elements of closeness involving the objects of worship that the disciples are told to draw near to, paralleling the concept of unity. This further suggests that this text is consistent with other dance texts; therefore, having considered the similarities between *GSavior* and *AJohn* and the dance traditions recorded by scholars studying ancient dance, it seems highly probable that *GSavior* reflects a dance ritual and should be added to the corpus of known dance texts.

## Chapter 6- Brief Theoretical Considerations: Ritual Type

In order to further understand the circle dance in *AJohn* it is useful to address selected theoretical considerations. Although still speculative, such considerations can assist in the analysis of *AJohn*'s circle dance ritual and perhaps provide hints as to the social function of this ritual.<sup>95</sup> The considerations discussed in this chapter center on the classification of the circle dance within a ritual typology. The scholars of *AJohn* discussed below describe the circle dance as belonging to a certain ritual type. Each scholar employs his own descriptive terminology in his classification; however, it is interesting to note that despite the difference in description and terminology, ultimately all of the scholars discussed here appear to describe the ritual as belonging to two basic ritual categories—rites of passage and rites of communion.<sup>96</sup> This chapter will examine these scholars' descriptions of the ritual type in *AJohn* and discuss the two basic ritual categories which seem evident from these descriptions.

### Summary of the Proposed Ritual Classifications for the Circle Dance<sup>97</sup>

Kaestli has classified this dance as a mystery religion initiation rite. His description is formulated by analogy to textual accounts of mystery religion rituals and by the usage of the term *mysterion* within the text of *AJohn*. (94)<sup>98</sup> He describes the ritual as a dancing of divine truths.<sup>99</sup> He speaks of this process as a physical manifestation of revelation which is concrete not

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<sup>95</sup> It is not within the scope of this study to provide an extensive discussion on the social function of this ritual; however, these brief considerations will hopefully be useful to other researchers, particularly those wanting to study the social function of rituals such as the circle dance in *AJohn*.

<sup>96</sup> These two categories, although basic and somewhat standard, are not above critique. These two types are often viewed as pervasive throughout culture, and it could be argued that all rituals can be classified within these types. Therefore if these types describe all rituals, then one could argue that they are not useful in categorizing the differences between rituals.

<sup>97</sup> The purpose of this section is to summarize these scholars' descriptions rather than critique their classifications.

<sup>98</sup> Evidence is briefly discussed in Kaestli: 85. This is Kaestli's response to Dewey. Although the particular publication analyzed above was published after Dewey's, Kaestli's argument was initially published in 1983. Unfortunately Kaestli's original presentation of the argument was not accessible to this author.

<sup>99</sup> Kaestli: 84.

metaphoric.<sup>100</sup> This activity leads to individual transformation, assimilation with the divine, and naturally defines the group dynamic of insiders and outsiders.<sup>101</sup>

Using selected sources on ancient dance, Dewey describes the ritual as a mystery religion rite.<sup>102</sup> He does not use the term initiation; however, he describes the dance as inviting individuals into a participatory experience which corresponds to Kaestli's process of individual transformation leading to divine and group assimilation.<sup>103</sup> He also appears to be describing a similar physical manifestation of revelation as described by Kaestli.<sup>104</sup> Based on Dewey's similarity to Kaestli, and Kaestli's assessment that he and Dewey are basically in agreement as to the function of the ritual, this author understands Dewey's classification of the circle dance ritual as a mystery religion initiation rite.

Schneider also describes this ritual as a mystery religion initiation rite; although his specific terminology also incorporates the terms 'secret sacrament,' and 'sacrament of resurrection.'<sup>105</sup> Schneider sees the ritual as a metaphor for resurrection.<sup>106</sup> Transformation and conversion are important terms for Schneider as well.<sup>107</sup> He describes the ritual in three stages.<sup>108</sup> The first stage is a transformation stage which begins with conversion to the ideals of the community practicing the ritual. This is expressed through the imitation of the deity in the circle dance. The second stage is described as initiation into the mysteries or secrets. The third

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid: 85.

<sup>102</sup> For a complete list of sources see Dewey, 74-80. Dewey's ancient sources include Lucian, *The Dance*; Plato, *Laws* and *Phaedrus*; Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks*; *Corpus Hermeticum*, specifically *Poimandres*; and *Pistis Sophia*. Although not all of these texts deal directly with mystery religion they provide clues as to the dances of mystery religions according to Dewey.

<sup>103</sup> Dewey: 78, 80.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.: 80.

<sup>105</sup> Schneider, 162.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 48ff.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 48,72.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 166-179.

stage is described as incorporation within the group and union with Christ and with other members. Schneider's classification is derived from his analysis of the theology of *AJohn*, particularly his interpretation of the numerous accounts of resurrection in the text.<sup>109</sup>

Miller describes the ritual as a rite of mystical union. This mystical union exists on earth even after Christ has departed.<sup>110</sup> According to Miller, it is expressed within the text as a marriage where the initiate becomes one with the deity.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore Miller describes stages to this ritual as well. First there is a break from the past and a break from the imprisonment of the flesh.<sup>112</sup> This is followed by individual transformation into a new self that is united to the deity.<sup>113</sup> This transformation also has social ramifications dealing with group identification.<sup>114</sup> Miller's classification is derived from comparative analysis of the contextual evidence surrounding the text of *AJohn*, particularly his conclusions on the presence of the Christ-Sophia duality and his interpretation of the so-called gnostic theology of divine male and female couplings within the text.<sup>115</sup> The scope of Miller's comparative evidence is vast.<sup>116</sup> His reading of these sources and their parallels to *AJohn* seems odd. It is this author's suspicion that much of Miller's analysis is not credible.

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<sup>109</sup> Schneider interprets the various physical resurrections narrated in the text as interpretive clues as to the ritual's meaning. Schneider, 48.

<sup>110</sup> James Miller, 107.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-124.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 93ff.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 112ff.

<sup>116</sup> He includes various works of Plato; Philo, *On the Contemplative Life*; *Pistis Sophia*; *Acts of Thomas*; *Corpus Hermeticum*; Euripides, *Bacchae*, and many other sources, 81ff.

## Rites of Passage<sup>117</sup>

Having reviewed the descriptive terminology employed by scholars of *AJohn*, we will now discuss how ultimately these scholars appear to be describing the circle dance as a rite of passage. Though typically they do not note this fact, nevertheless this classification is evident to this author. The classic rite of passage ritual has three stages, separation, liminality, and incorporation into a new group.<sup>118</sup> According to Bell, the key element in transitioning to the final stage is the completion of a transformation to a new identity.<sup>119</sup> It is the opinion of this author that these three stages, along with transformation, can be seen in the descriptions given by each of the scholars discussed above. Each uses his own terminology to imply that the individual passes from one group to another by passing through an intermediary stage.<sup>120</sup> For all the above mentioned scholars, this intermediary stage is described as having a decisive period that brings change and transformation. In this sense the intermediary stages described above correspond to the liminal stage of a rite of passage. The transformation leads the individual into the final stage, incorporation within the group.

It is apparent that these scholars have differing theories as to how this transformation occurs within the rite. For example, Kaestli and Dewey emphasize the physical reality of the dance as the driving force behind the transformation. Kaestli notes, “the participants danced and

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<sup>117</sup> It should be noted that rites of passage are not necessarily linked to life-cycle changes as the term implies. Initiation into clubs, fraternities, and secret societies are also commonly categorized as rites of passage. See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95.

<sup>118</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 1969. In this work Turner expanded upon concepts presented by Arnold Van Gennep, in *Rites of Passage*, 1960. For a summarization of rites of passage rituals as a category in ritual studies see Bell, 94-101.

<sup>119</sup> Bell, 95.

<sup>120</sup> The intermediary stage appears to correspond to the actual ritual performance before the transformation occurs.

so deepened their knowledge, or rather their experiences, of the divine truth thanks to the dance.”<sup>121</sup> Dewey expresses a similar opinion,

“The medium becomes the way in which the message is to be taken. Especially in cultic situations, the dance would speak to the surplus depth of meaning engaged in by the initiates. It was not simply a matter of presenting the meaning in another fashion but of suggesting by the very format used that what was at stake was inviting, participatory, and encounterable. Finally it would witness by its very movement that the meaning was elusive, transcendent, and ecstatic.”<sup>122</sup>

Both Kaestli and Dewey are focused on how the participant engaging in the dance would experience the meaning of the ritual. According to such interpretations, it is through this experience of encountering meaning that they would be transformed. This transformation occurs through experiential knowledge of what Kaestli calls divine truths. The transformed individual is now an insider because of this gained experiential knowledge. This interpretation perhaps corresponds to the text of *AJohn* which indicates that an individual must dance to gain knowledge. (*AJohn* 94)

Schneider concurs that this ritual is an initiation rite which brings about a transformation of the participant. He indicates that the mechanism for transformation is through a death and resurrection motif.<sup>123</sup> Miller appears to be in agreement with Schneider’s analysis which is illustrated by his treatment of Christ as Dionysus.<sup>124</sup> The centrality of this death and resurrection motif seems to parallel Lonsdale’s discussion of Greek dances of disorder as discussed earlier.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Kaestli: 84.

<sup>122</sup> Dewey: 80.

<sup>123</sup> Schneider, 162.

<sup>124</sup> Miller, 136ff.

<sup>125</sup> Lonsdale uses the term *communitas*, along with inversion, and liminality (originally discussed by Arnold Van Gennep, in *Rites of Passage*, 1960) to discuss Greek dances of disorder, 76-110. He credits Turner for these concepts in the introduction saying "Dance is a form of ritual drama that temporarily reverses or inverts the everyday social order (Victor Turner's theories of *communitas* and *antistructure*)," (19). Lonsdale neither quotes Turner in reference to these concepts nor does he cite the major work in which these terms are discussed, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 1969. Lonsdale does cite and quote Turner’s other works regarding different issues.



According to Miller, in joining the circle the initiate is inverting normal order and group identification.<sup>126</sup> Through ecstatic dance, understood by Miller as a vehicle for enacting inversion, the initiate experiences this death and resurrection. The initiate is resurrected to a new identity both socially and cosmically. This shares many structural similarities with Christian baptism, another rite with which perhaps the circle dance competed.

### **Rites of Communion<sup>127</sup>**

Rite of communion is the second basic ritual classification that is evident from our summary of scholarship on *AJohn*. According to Bell, “Communion implies that at a critical moment in the rite there is a union of the human and divine worlds. . . The purpose of this form of cosmic union is usually explained as a matter of renewing the universe and reordering the human-divine relations that sustain it.”<sup>128</sup> In Bell’s description we see many points of similarity with the ritual descriptions of the circle dance in *AJohn*. Certainly the notion of union is discussed directly by Schneider and Miller. Furthermore Kaestli’s term ‘assimilation’ seems to describe the same concept of union. Bell’s description of the typical purposes of rites of communion also seems to correspond with our analysis of the circle dance in *AJohn* as bringing forth order from disorder.<sup>129</sup>

Although most of the scholars discussed above describe the presence of communion with a deity in the circle dance ritual, they nevertheless do not agree as to the character of this communion. For example Schneider emphasizes the point that the imitation of Christ in the

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<sup>126</sup> Miller, 86ff.

<sup>127</sup> “Communion” here is not a direct reference to the Christian eucharist. Rites of communion are discussed in conjunction with rites of exchange and rites of sacrifice in Bell, 108-115.

<sup>128</sup> Bell, 112.

<sup>129</sup> The reader should note the previous discussion regarding the cross (Christ) as an ordering principle as well.

center of the circle is the identifying element which classifies this as communion.<sup>130</sup>

Transformation into Christ is required as our textual analysis reflects, but this transformation is not merely personal. It is also communal transformation. All within the circle become united with the cross of light which brings all into unity with one another as well. So this rite of communion is understood by the participants as communion with a deity as well as communion with others in the group.

Contrasting to Schneider's view of communion, Miller characterizes the communion and transformation into Christ in a more erotic light. He describes this ritual as marital union between the participant and Christ. This is perhaps in line with the Valentinian bridal chamber sacrament.<sup>131</sup> Miller characterizes the ecstatic theme by comparing it to the erotic. As an example he notes,

“The dance of the New Dionysus (Christ) was as deeply charged with eroticism as the mountain revels of his pagan prototype, an eroticism heightened by the identification of Christ with the energetic lover in the Song of Songs who came leaping upon the mountains, and skipping over the hills to summon his beloved to their wedding. By sympathizing with his joyfulness, spontaneity and rapturous desire for union, the chorus of the Logos understood the moving force behind their dance of love, not reason and not a rarefied, other worldly, dispassionate . . . love of wisdom but an overwhelming tenderness, an instinctive, impregnating desire to be wedded forever to a specific person.”<sup>132</sup>

Later he continues by saying that “as wanderers at the end of the ritual the disciples are . . . staggering in an ecstatic daze like bacchants who have just had intercourse with a god. ‘I wish to beget’ announces the god of this hymn. . . .”<sup>133</sup> This evocative if not fanciful depiction illustrates Miller's own apparent interests in what he considers the erotic elements of the text; however, it does speak to the potentially erotic element that can accompany descriptions of communion with

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<sup>130</sup> Schneider, 162-182.

<sup>131</sup> Junod and Kaestli are quite convinced of the Valentinian origins of this text.

<sup>132</sup> Miller, 136.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 138.

a deity.<sup>134</sup> To determine whether the mechanism for communion is imitation, as Schneider suggests, or mystical marriage, more evidence is needed; however, the negative orientation toward sexuality within the entire text of *AJohn* certainly discredits Miller's orgiastic interpretation.<sup>135</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

It is important to recognize that the ritual descriptions above provided by Kaestli, Dewey, Schneider, and Miller are identified as speculative by the researchers themselves. Their analyses are formulated primarily with reference to their individual hypothesized interpretive frameworks for this ritual. Although many of the scholars discussed in this chapter have described the ritual as belonging to one ritual type according to their individual typologies, this does not exclude the possibility that the ritual can fit within multiple types. It is the opinion of this author that both ritual classifications discussed above are valid, and that the dance ritual in *AJohn* is best understood as both a rite of passage and a rite of communion.

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<sup>134</sup> It is the opinion of the author that if such erotic descriptions are present in *AJohn*, they should be understood metaphorically rather than as evidence of any orgiastic or sexual activities accompanying the ritual.

<sup>135</sup> It is the opinion of this author that determining the mechanism for union, beyond simply the dance, would require more evidence than is available within the text.

*"I see Christ as the incarnation of the piper who is calling us. He dances that shape and pattern which is at the heart of our reality. By Christ I mean not only Jesus; in other times and places, other planets, there may be other Lords of the Dance. But Jesus is the one I know of first and best. I sing of the dancing pattern in the life and words of Jesus."- Green print for song "Lord of the Dance" by Sydney Carter, 1974*

## **Chapter 7- Conclusion: Experience and Significance of Circle Dance Ritual in Early Christianity**

### **Experience: Speculations Concerning the Character of the Circle Dance**

Having reviewed selected textual, contextual, and theoretical clues as to the function and structure of the ritual in *AJohn*, we may now turn to speculations concerning the experience of this circle dance. In order to construct a potential framework for understanding this ritual as an experience for the individual, we will synthesize notions drawn from the work of scholars of ritual and experience. No doubt due to the methodological quagmire which it creates, few scholars have attempted such a reconstruction of the ritual as and experience. The author, however, is well aware of the problem of extrapolating evidence of a ritual experience from textual sources yet she finds the speculative process useful, particularly when there are no other interpretive options.

Certainly the efficacy of this ritual owes much to its structure. The physical circle itself defines a boundary. It physically creates insiders and outsiders. Within the circle the focus is on Christ, the object and goal of transformation. The immediacy of the cosmic element works with these structures to add a sense of legitimacy to the experience as well as a sense of timelessness and sacredness.

Our analysis seems to indicate that the ritual is not an indirect revealer of knowledge but a transformative mystical encounter. It may be that the ritual was seen as direct participation with the dance as it was performed by the disciples, including the participation of the cosmos. In these ways there is an overlap of normal impossibilities becoming possible. Perhaps the participants feel as though they are having an experience outside time and outside the normal limits of mattered reality. They may perhaps perceive this as being direct experience of the supernatural. Ideally the experience itself is the goal of the ritual and having had the experience one becomes changed, full of experiential knowledge which changes one's place within the cosmos and the community.

The dance is most likely ecstatic; although, the physical mechanism of attaining ecstasy is indeterminate. Commonly ecstatic dances are frenzied; although, they do not have to be.<sup>136</sup> Modes of ecstasy are historically and culturally specific. Although trends may emerge within cross-cultural studies on ecstatic dance there is not enough data in the case of *AJohn* to create a physical description of the ecstatic character. The important element to note, assuming our analysis is accurate, is that this dance is a highly emotional experience for the participant, and some sort of physical technique such as, twirling or head circles, is possibly used to lead participants into an altered state of consciousness.

The ritual literally centers on Christ. It is difficult to reveal how the central object of worship is presented as Christ. According to Sach's comparative analysis on dance, circle dances are typically not mimetic but ecstatic, and thus freer in their dance movement. He sees these two types of dance as a pervasive duality in dance classifications; however, he also sees

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<sup>136</sup> Erika Bourguignon, "Trance Dance," in *The Highest State of Consciousness*, ed. John White (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), 331-343. This study illustrates that ecstatic dance is culturally bound and then seeks to isolate certain trends.

rituals which tend to overlap the two.<sup>137</sup> In these cases dressing up as the character allows the ritual to be both imitative and ecstatic. Costume allows the dancer to imitate the character without having to dance as the character. This frees the dancer to become ecstatic. If Sach's argument is accurate it seems likely that the Christ figure was imitated with dress rather than mimetic imitation.<sup>138</sup>

In what follows the author offers a speculative theological explanation of the significance of the ritual. Though this is merely an impressionistic reconstruction, it does help to illustrate how such a ritual might have been understood given what has been discussed in this study in terms of what we do know about the people, their theology and other social and religious factors of the time and place. Following the model in the text, the leader begins the hymn while others begin to circle. After the hymn is begun the Christ figure dances as understood from the textual phrase "Grace dances." As Grace dances the celestial component of this ritual enters the scene, showing that the centering on Christ is not merely on the horizontal plane but on the vertical as well. The heavens dance as Christ dances because Christ is the connector and mediator between these two groups. His function theologically and also ritually is to act as the cosmic mechanism by which humans come into unity with the divine. This is revealed prominently in the vision of the cross of light. The cross of light is the ordering principle in the cosmos and this ritual is now beginning to bring the participants in line with this order. The participants focus on union with Christ to achieve the transformative experience referenced in John's vision. At this moment the participant should be experiencing ecstasy. When the ritual is completed, participants not only feel changed by their experience but their perception of this change is reinforced by their changed status in the group. They are now insiders by their experiential knowledge of the cross

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<sup>137</sup> Sachs, 112-138.

<sup>138</sup> Dress here may refer to symbolic attributes associated with Christ rather than literal theatric costuming

of light, Christ. They have experienced as truth that “Whosoever danceth not, knoweth not the way of life.”<sup>139</sup>

### **The Significance of Circle Dance in Early Christianity**

This paper has argued that this circle dance ritual found in *AJohn* possibly represents an alternative form of early Christianity. This ritual became unpopular in later centuries, and the performance of this ritual ceased. The ritual clearly relies heavily on the Greek tradition, incorporating the philosophical notion of order and disorder in the cosmos. Syrian tradition also influenced this ritual providing a model of a dancing deity and a method for communion with that deity. The tradition also shows some similarity with Christian understanding of dance both contemporaneously and in the following centuries. The ritual may be present in more than one text which suggests that the ritual was practiced outside the immediate experience of the compiler of *AJohn*. If this is accurate then the context of circle dance ritual broadens with increased sources providing evidence for its form and meaning. Furthermore, this paper has offered exploratory comments regarding the ritual’s form and function. The ritual revolves around the themes of initiation, transformation, communion, and mystical knowledge. The interplay between these themes defines individuals within the group and also defines the boundaries of the group itself. From these conclusions we have also speculated as to the character and experience of the ritual dance.

Having accomplished our purposes in this study, it is now prudent to turn our attention again to the significance of this study and to the questions asked in the introduction. Why has the historically dominant form of Christianity ultimately rejected the image of a dancing Christ and

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<sup>139</sup> Curt Sach’s translation of the hymn of Christ in *AJohn*

had such a suspicion of dance ritual? Many potential answers to this question have been implied throughout this study. Perhaps dancing was too “Pagan” for certain Christians. Perhaps they feared the inevitable blending of Christianity with the religions that preceded it? In the post-Constantine years perhaps the desire for Roman legitimization meant that Christian dance, based on a Greek model not inherently trusted by the Romans, had to be downplayed. Perhaps the climate toward dance shifted as Christianity became more and more mainstream and Christians just naturally fell in line with a popular distrust of dances of disorder.

What of the dance association with *AJohn*? Could it be that the ritual was condemned? Could the necrophilia and idolatry, not to mention the general gnostic character of the text, simply have been too much for certain Christians to take? Perhaps Christians that loved the text and the ritual within produced a negative reaction in the communities that became dominant. It is also possible that a general theological orientation away from affirmation of the body, the physical, and pleasure influenced the course of this historical development.

The answer to the question regarding the rejection of the dancing Christ and circle dance ritual is clearly complex and potentially unanswerable; however, it seems clear to this author that many of the above mentioned factors apply. It is also clear to this author that this particular text has been overlooked by Christians, dance scholars, and religious scholars alike despite its potentially pivotal role in the orthodox sentiment on dance and thus its pivotal role in western dance history. Hopefully this study will be one step in the rectification of this error.



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## **Appendix I : Complete Text of the Hymn in AJohn (Schaferdiek, 181-184)**

“... he assembled us all and said, ‘Before I am delivered to them, let us sing a hymn to the Father .... So he told us to form a circle, holding one another’s hands, and himself stood in the middle and said, ‘Answer Amen to me.’ So he began to sing a hymn and to say,”

Glory be to thee, Father,

And we circled round him and answered him, “Amen”

Glory be to thee, Logos:

Glory be to thee, Grace. -Amen

Glory be to thee, Spirit:

Glory be to thee, Holy One:

Glory be to thy Glory. -Amen

We praise thee, Father:

We thank thee, Light:

In whom darkness dwelleth not. –Amen

And why we give thanks, I tell you:

I will be saved, and I will save. –Amen

I will be loosed, and I will loose. –Amen

I will be wounded, and I will wound. –Amen

I will be born, and I will bear. –Amen

I will eat, and I will be eaten. –Amen

I will hear, and I will be heard. –Amen

I will be thought, Being wholly thought.–Amen

I will be washed, and I will wash. –Amen

Grace dances.

I will pipe, Dance, all of you. – Amen.

I will mourn, Beat you all your breasts –Amen.

(The) one Ogdoad sings praises with us. –Amen

The twelfth number dances on high. –Amen

To the All it belongs to dance in the height (?) –Amen.

He who does not dance does not know what happens. -Amen.

I will flee, and I will remain. –Amen

I will adorn, and I will be adorned. –Amen

I will be united, and I will unite. –Amen

I have no houses, and I have houses. –Amen

I have no place, and I have places. –Amen

I have no temple, and I have temples. –Amen

I am a lamp to you (sing.), who see me. –Amen

I am mirror to you who know me. –Amen

I am a door to you (who) knock on me. –Amen

I am way to you (the) traveler. –Amen

Now if you follow my dance,

see yourself in me who am speaking,

and when you have seen what I do, keep silent about my mysteries.

You who dance, consider what I do, for yours is

this passion of man which I am to suffer.

For you could by no means have understood what you suffer

unless to you as Logos I had been sent by the Father.

You who saw what I do saw (me) as suffering,

and seeing it you did not stay but where wholly moved.

Being moved toward wisdom (?) you have me as a support; rest in me.

Who I am, you shall know when I go forth.

What I now am seem to be, that I am not;

what I am you shall see when you come.

If you knew how to suffer you would be able not to suffer.

Learn how to suffer and you shall be able to not suffer.

What you do not know I myself will teach you.

I am your God, not (the God) of the traitor.

I will that holy souls be made in harmony with me.

Understand the word of wisdom!

Say again to me,

Glory be to thee, Father,

Glory be to thee, Logos,

Glory be to thee, Spirit, -Amen

“As for me, if you would understand what I was:

by the Logos I made a jest of everything and was not made a jest at all.

I exulted: but you do not understand the whole,

and when you have understood it, say, Glory be to thee, Father. –Amen”

**Appendix II: Lyrics for "Lord of the Dance"**

I danced in the morning when the world was begun  
And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun  
And I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth  
At Bethlehem I had my birth  
Dance, then, wherever you may be  
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he  
And I'll lead you all wherever you may be  
And I'll lead you all in the dance, said he  
I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee  
But they would not dance and they would not follow me  
I danced for the fishermen, for James and John  
They came to me and the dance went on  
I danced on the Sabbath when I cured the lame  
The holy people said it was a shame  
They whipped and they stripped and they hung me high  
And they left me there on a cross to die  
I danced on a Friday and the sky turned black  
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back  
They buried my body and they thought I'd gone  
But I am the dance and I still go on  
They cut me down and I leapt up high  
I am the life that'll never, never die  
I'll live in you if you'll live in me  
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he